

Definition of a Diversity Issue – What You Don’t Know You Don’t Know

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Question posed to me from a human resource professional –

What exactly is a diversity issue? We all take about them, but I want a clear definition to share with my human resource colleagues!

Too many professionals in human resources don’t have a clear understanding of what exactly is a diversity issue. As human resource professionals we have good instincts but we lack a formal, clearly written down definition of a diversity issue. We like to describe this situation as “What you don’t know you don’t know.” To set the record straight please read on.

You have a firm/organizational diversity (inclusive workplace) issue...

- when an issue (i.e., policy or business practice - formal, informal, internal or external) has a **different impact** on a particular group (for example, who gets mentored, choice assignments – who does not)
- when it **happens more frequently** to a particular group (for example, who gets to go to pitches – who makes them, who is present to observe, and who does not or who gets real feedback on their briefs and who does not)
- when it is **more difficult for one group to overcome** (upward mobility for a particular group within a firm including “glass or brown ceilings”)

A diversity issue exists where the firm policy or business practice has an impact exclusive of difference (not inclusive of difference). Is there a trend or pattern (intentional or unintentional) that affects different groups of staff differently?

Having a diversity issue is not necessarily a bad thing. Doing nothing about it given you have knowledge of the issue(s) is where firms go wrong (a kind of negligence so to speak). Being in denial about these issues does not make them go away. Ignorance is not bliss and will not keep your clients from scrutinizing your practices.

The question is why does our organization have this diversity issue(s) and how can we take action to correct it and improve the situation. Study the situation. Look to take corrective action. This is exactly what you will do when you conduct a firm-wide diversity needs assessment. From the assessment will come a diversity strategy and plan

that outlines and presents to your firm and your clients how the firm is addressing your diversity issues and becoming more diverse and inclusive. Prior to conducting an assessment you must be ready to challenge the status quo.

Status quo – doing the same things we have always done in managing our human resources - while the workplace and marketplace are changing dramatically – is organizational suicide. When a workplace and a marketplace are getting increasingly diverse – organizations must adapt, change, quite frankly proactively anticipate these changes so to not allow emerging diversity issues to grow out of control.

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